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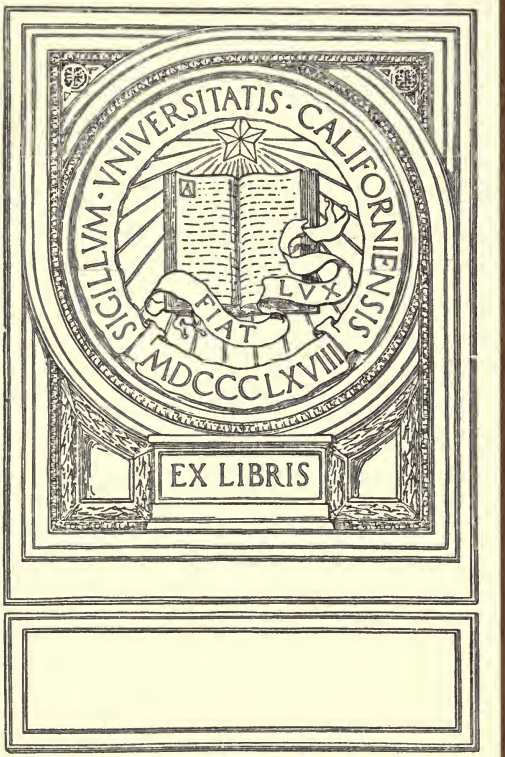
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THE MICHIGAN ESSAY

MICHIGAN'S FIRST NEWSPAPER

BY

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UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

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THE MICHIGAN ESSAY

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The earliest effort in Catholic pioneer journalism began in the first decade of the nineteenth century when, in 1809, Rev. Father Gabriel Richard of Detroit made possible the publication of the *Michigan Essay or Impartial Observer*. If we examine the conditions in the Northwest at this time, we see the absolute need of a newspaper in the vast and sparsely settled territory of Michigan. Its people were, for the most part, French, unacquainted with the English tongue, and many of them rude and uninstructed even in their own language.*

Those who know the history of this territory in those early days will remember also the activities of Father Richard as an educator.† The establishment of this periodical was part of his comprehensive scheme for the enlightenment of the people of his own flock and of the territory at large. As an initial step in such

* Contributions to American Educational History edited by Herbert B. Adams. History of Higher Education in Michigan Serial No. 11 by Andrew C. McLaughlin, Government Publication, Bureau of Education, whole No. 174, Circular of Information No. 4, Washington Government Printing Office, 1891, p. 11.

† See Article by Rev. J. J. O'Brien in the Historical Records and Studies of the United States Catholic Historical Society of New York. Vol. V. Part I. Nov. 1907, pp. 77–94.

See also Metropolitan Catholic Almanac 1855 pp. 43–57
See also annals of the Propagation of the Faith 1800 to 1830

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a plan for the uplifting of his fellow-citizens, the newspaper was perhaps the best means that he could have employed.

We may regard this scheme of Father Richard as one of the determining causes which gave o this country its first Catholic periodical. Another consideration which hastened its establishment was the loss occasioned by a disastrous fire that swept Detroit in 1805. Hardly a building was saved from the fury of this great conflagration. Father Richard and his flock were compelled to seek temporary quarters until he could devise some means towards the rebuilding of St. Anne's Church. With this object in view, he journeyed to Baltimore in 1808, and it was on this occasion that he purchased a printing press and a font of type. These he brought overland to Detroit and set up at Spring Wells in the house of Jacques Lasselle.*

Many persons have claimed for this press the honor of being the first one to be set up throughout the Northwest, but it is even questionable whether it was the first in operation in Detroit itself; for there were proclamations issued to the people of this vicinity by Lieutenant Governor Hamilton as early as the year 1777. These were dated from Detroit showing, presumably, that they were printed there. Strange to say, these were the only printed documents that were, over a long stretch of years, credited to Detroit as the place of issue. We may reasonably conclude from this that the Lieutenant-Governor's proclamation was dated from Detroit but printed elsewhere. Another press was owned by Alexander and William Macomb who received it from England in 1785; but there is no

* Historical Records and Studies of the United States Cath. Hist. Soc. Vol. V., Part 1, p. 85.

evidence that it was ever put in operation.* It has been further asserted that the *Michigan Essay* was the first paper printed in the Northwest. Various newspapers were already printed in the Territory before 1800. Cincinnati and Chillicothe early boasted of this means of enlightenment. It is known that Freeman and Son started a newspaper in 1795. Chillicothe established two papers about the same period. Before the close of the century at least thirteen were being printed in the Northwest.† That the *Essay* was the first periodical edited in that part known as Michigan is a well established fact.‡

Many misstatements have also been made regarding its real publisher and editor.| The regular collection and dispatch of news in those days presupposed a widespread interest in public affairs. This qualification Father Richard possessed to a remarkable degree, as is well attested by every local historian of eminence;§ but his religious duties and the extent of his missionary

* *American Catholic News*, New York, Sept. 17th, 1891, p. 5. Report of Don C. Henderson's Speech of the *Allegan Journal* before the West Michigan Press Association held at Kalamazoo. Also Michigan Historical and Pioneer Collection Vol. 13, p. 394 and p. 489. Also the *Detroit Free Press* May 30th, 1888. Also Historical Records and Studies of U. S. Cath. Hist. Soc. of N. Y. cited above, p. 86.

† Circular of Information No. 4. Bureau of Education Serial No. 11. p. 11 et seq., full reference cited above. Also the History of Printing in America by Isaiah Thomas, Worcester, 1810.

‡ Michigan Historical and Pioneer Collection Vol. 13, p. 394.

| Most reliable account is Silas Farmer's History of Detroit and Michigan vol. I. pp. 670–671. The author of this work went to Worcester and sought out in the Thomas Library this periodical; he had a photograph made of each sheet of the first and only issue of this paper.

§ See Cooley's "Michigan," Houghton, Mifflin & Co., New York, pp. 307–311. See also Rev. J. J. O'Brien's Article in Historical Records & Studies, etc. cited above.

labors did not enable him to give his time to the publishing and editing of this paper. He therefore placed the publication of the *Essay* in the hands of a capable layman, who could devote his time exclusively to the work, while the priest himself acted merely as supervisor.* That Father Richard was neither the publisher nor the editor of the *Michigan Essay* is found by an examination of the first issue of that periodical. Probably he contributed to the French portion, but it is distinctly stated on the first page that the paper was printed and published by James M. Miller.

A brief retrospect of the period preceding the establishment of *The Michigan Essay* will disclose many facts of interest, touching the history of journalism. Various methods have from time to time been used for the circulation of news, but we can claim for Detroit and its vicinity the most primitive stage of development,—the "spoken newspaper." Such indeed was the means that Father Richard first used to arouse interest among the people, which was afterwards to ripen into a more active and intelligent participation in the affairs of government. He appointed a town-crier, whose duty it was to publish, every Sunday, from the doors of St. Anne's, news items and matters of general concern to the waiting congregation and to the public at large. We are told that not infrequently, the crier announced even auction sales, horse races, and the date of the next fox-hunt. Sometimes notices were written

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* History of Detroit and Michigan by Silas Farmer. Catholic Periodicals published in U. S. A. Supplement to a list printed in Vol. 4 of the Records of Cath. Hist. Soc. of Phila. see p. 6.

Campbell, History of Michigan. Tenbrook, American State Universities. Michigan Pioneer & Historical Collection Vol. 13 p. 394.

and posted in some convenient place near the church. For a while the duties of the crier were fulfilled by Theophilus Mettz,* the sacristan of St. Anne's. Regularly, after mass on Sundays, he stationed himself on the steps of the Church, within view of all and there made such announcements as the eager people were anxious to hear.†

Though the town-crier performed his duties to the satisfaction of all, his labors, nevertheless, were confined within narrow limits. In the first place, matters of local interest were his chief concern. When, perchance, he did have news from afar it rarely circulated beyond the vicinity of Detroit. Consequently the arrival of Father Richard's press in the territory was hailed with great enthusiasm.

As regards the paper about which we are chiefly concerned the expectations of its promoters soon came to naught. The *Michigan Essay or Impartial Observer* began its career on August 31, 1809. It was the intention of the publisher that the paper should appear every Thursday.‡ Exactly how many issues did appear we do not know. Five copies of the first publication are all that have been discovered up to the present

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* Theophilus Mettez afterwards became printer and publisher. See Records & Studies of the Cath. Hist. Soc. of N. Y. cited above.

† History of Higher Education in Michigan by Andrew C. McLaughlin cited above p. 11.

Also Records & Stduies of U. S. Cath. Hist. Soc. of N Y. pp. 74-94.

‡ List of Catholic Periodicals published in U. S. Supplementary list. Reprint from the Records of American Cath. Hist. Soc. of Phila. by Rev. Thomas Cooke Middleton. See also Amer. Cath. News, N. Y. Sept. 27, 1891, p. 5. Speech of Don C. Henderson cited above.

time. Some have concluded from this that the periodical immediately ceased to appear.*

This initial number of *The Essay* has a history peculiarly its own. Of the copies still known to exist, one was possessed for a short time by a friend of the publisher, whose home was in Utica, N. Y. Perhaps it had been sent by Mr. Miller himself to his home town; for we know that prior to 1809 he had resided there. From Utica, it was sent to Isaiah Thomas, of Worcester, who was writing a history of printing in America. The following note, written in the margin of the first page of the periodical, suggests at least that there might have been more than one issue:

UTICA, N. Y., Aug. 31, 1810.

SIR:

I send you this paper published by a friend of mine to insert in your 'History of Printing.' If he sees your advertisement he will send you more, perhaps, of later date.

We have no conclusive evidence that more than one number was issued.† Brown's Campaign of the Western Army incidentally mentions that "only three numbers were issued," but this must not be regarded as an authentic statement, since the author seems merely to indicate that the paper had a very brief existence.

After the discovery of the copy already described three others were found in the city of Detroit. One of these numbers, held for over fifty years by Thomas

* History of Detroit and Michigan by Silas Farmer, Vol. I, pp. 670–671. See also Records and Studies of Cath. Hist. Soc. of N. Y. cited above.

† The Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collection says that eight or nine copies appeared but no other testimony is furnished to support this claim. It is accompanied with some misstatement of facts.

Lee, of Leeville, recently came into the possession of H. E. Baker of the *Detroit Tribune*. Another copy was saved from oblivion by William Michell who discovered it among some old papers. A third copy of Vol. 1, No. 1. is at present in the Detroit Public Library. There was still another number of this issue in the old Detroit Museum. We may suppose that this remaining copy is still in existence although we have no accurate information concerning it.

When the *Michigan Essay or Impartial Observer* was introduced to the people it was a four page paper, nine and one-quarter inches by sixteen inches in size. The statement, so frequently repeated that the paper was printed mostly in French is unreliable. That the periodical was called the "*Essai du Michigan*" is also without foundation. An examination of the first number reveals the fact that there were only one and a half columns in French, and that the remainder of the paper as well as the title were in English.*

There is nothing in the first issue to indicate that the *Essay* was to be the mouth-piece of the Catholics of Michigan. Its columns were open to any gentleman of talent, provided he abstained from controversy. We can reasonably suppose, however, that it was the intention of the founder to reflect, in some measure at least, the opinion of the Catholic people in the territory. The most we can claim for the *Essay*, then, is that it was a semi-Catholic periodical. This conclusion is based principally upon the circumstances attending its establishment. Its chief purpose was to inform, to entertain and to educate. Articles from

* History of Detroit and Michigan by Silas Farmer cited above. Also Records and Studies of the U. S. Cath. Hist. Soc. of N. Y. cited above.

various newspapers, foreign and domestic, furnished the bulk of the news section. The items of foreign interest were taken mainly from the *London Morning Chronicle* and the *Liverpool Aurora;* and such information appeared four or five months after the events occurred. Incidents printed four or five weeks before in the *New York Spectator*, the *Pittsburg Commonwealth*, and the *Boston Mirror* were news for the *Essay*. Strange to say there was not one item of local interest in the first issue of sixteen columns; and but one short notice that bears somewhat of the nature of an editorial in which the publisher makes clear that he intends to assume an impartial attitude in political affairs, and invites contributions for his newspaper from all gentlemen of talent.

It must have been the intention of the publisher to print from time to time the original verse or selections from the English poets, with the view, no doubt, of entertaining readers, and at the same time creating in them a taste for good literature. At any rate, we see in this first issue excepts from Young's *Night Thoughts* entitled *Futurity;* also two other poems on *Evening* and *Happiness*. There were also prose articles on Politeness, Early Rising, and Husbandry. A very peculiar arrangement was made about subscription rates. One would naturally expect that city subscribers on account of their proximity to the office would receive the paper cheaper than outsiders. On the contrary, the people of Detroit were asked to pay five dollars a year; residents of Upper Canada and Michigan four and a half dollars; while the more distant subscribers could receive it for four dollars. Advertising space did not exceed one dollar and fifty cents a square for the first three insertions and twenty-five

cents a square for each subsequent one.* Only one advertisement appeared in the first issue, that of St. Anne's School. The publisher also gives notice that he is about to print several works; among others he mentions "Nine Days Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus."†

This periodical like a frail and delicate morning-glory lifted up its ambitious head to the rising light of progress but withered away in the noon-day sun of one hot August day. Why did this venture into the field of journalism fail so prematurely? It has been said that the *Essay* perished on account of insufficient patronage.‡ Perhaps if Father Richard could have given to this work his personal attention this project would have had a measure of success. Perhaps also if the subscription price was more reasonable the paper, small as it was, would have found many patrons. We know that journals of later and better times and of more advantageous circumstances barely subsisted, and some even suspended publication for a while, because they were not making expenses.

Though the *Essay* was so early doomed to failure, its press continued in service for a number of years. Several publications of a religious and of an educational character were printed. Many books of devotion, tracts, prayer-books and catechisms in the Indian dialect and in the French, but set up in English type, were published for Father Richard's missions throughout

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* History of Detroit and Michigan by Silas Farmer, cited above. See also Records and Studies of the U. S. Cath. Hist. Soc. cited above.

† American Catholic Quarterly, Phila. 1893 Vol. 18, p. 98. See also Records and Studies of U. S. Cath. Hist. Soc. cited above.

‡ Michigan Historical and Pioneer Collection Vol. VI.

the territory.* Even the laws and the official documents of the Territory were run off on this small hand-press, and a biographer of good Father Richard states that "he always made sure that this work was properly executed."† For a while the type-setting was done by Mr. A Coxshaw, who came west in 1809.‡ General Brock's proclamation during the War of 1812 was printed by this press. After the war many newspapers sprang into existence in Michigan, but the one that still remains the proud boast of the people is that pioneer of them all, the *Michigan Essay or Impartial Observer.*

* Ibid. Vol. XIII. Also Records and Studies of the U. S. Cath. Hist. Society of New York, Vol. V Part I, p. 87.

† Cyclopedia of Michigan, Historical and Biographical, Western Publishing and Engraving Company. Article on Rev. Gabriel Richard, p. 321.

‡ American Catholic Quarterly, Philadelphia, 1893 Vol. XVIII, p. 95 et seq.

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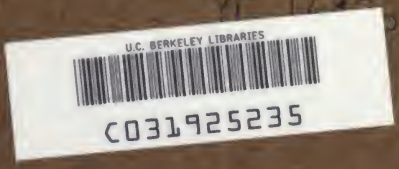

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